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ABSTRACT

The Portable Assisted Study Sequence (P.A.S.S.) is a nationally recognized program originally designed to offer migrant students the opportunity to work semi-independently on course work to earn full or partial credit toward high school completion. Two of the most outstanding characteristics exhibited by P.A.S.S. are its flexibility and its portability--students can work on this program in almost half the states. Because of these characteristics, the P.A.S.S. program is offered to the incarcerated population in Michigan, Washington, and Wisconsin, and a few other states are also exploring its feasibility. It is thought to be of great assistance in prison education, where as many as 90 percent of inmates lack a high school diploma. Characteristics of P.A.S.S. that make it attractive for use in correctional education include the following: variety of options (courses and subject areas, credit or remediation); support and guidance; active decision-making by students; conferencing with a contact person or others; contractual agreements; ongoing self-assessment and goal setting; nonauthoritarian teaching style; and portability. This flexible program could be an excellent means for inmates in all states to earn their high school diplomas, or at least to increase their education while working toward a self-determined goal. (Contains 10 references.) (KC)

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The Feasibility of Using the Portable Assisted Study Sequence (P.A.S.S.) in Correctional Institutions

by Rita J. Pare-Peters

The Portable Assisted Study Sequence (P.A.S.S.) is a nationally recognized program originally designed to offer migrant students the opportunity to work semi-independently on course work to earn full or partial credit towards high school completion. In 1978, California began the program in an attempt to lower the high dropout rate of migrant students and several states followed suit after learning of its success. By 1988, over twenty states had incorporated P.A.S.S. courses into their migrant education programs with Wisconsin developing Mini-P.A.S.S., an extension of P.A.S.S. for middle students, in 1985.

Two of the most outstanding characteristics exhibited by P.A.S.S. are its flexibility and portability. The fact that the program is offered in almost half of the states means that a student can begin a course, for example, in New York and complete it in Maine or any of the other participating states. Students who may relocate within their home state while using the program can also pick up where they left off without having lost all that they have accrued in the way of effort and credits. Due to these major benefits along with its accountability, the success of the P.A.S.S. program has caught the attention of other educational entities such as Adult Education, alternative education, and educational programs for the homeless. In a few states such as Michigan, Washington, and Wisconsin, P.A.S.S. is offered to the incarcerated population and a few other states are also exploring its feasibility.

Currently, there are an estimated one million inmates housed in correctional

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institutions nationwide. Within the next five to ten years, the majority of this population will be released, only to be replaced by newly convicted felons. Many of those released will begin their life out of prison at the same level of education at which they began their sentence. Additionally, it is estimated that one of four offenders will be rearrested within the first six months of their release. (Khatibi, et al, 1993). Furthermore, within the next three years of their release, nearly one-half will have returned to prison (duPont, 1995).

As many as 75% of those in prison have not completed their high school education. The National Advisory Council on Adult Education estimates that over 90% of newly committed inmates have not completed the twelfth grade and of those, approximately 20% would be considered functionally illiterate (Criner, 1991).

The Portable Assisted Study Sequence is one way that could contribute to inmates' attainment of high school completion. While Mini-P.A.S.S. is aimed at a middle school level, the design of P.A.S.S. is parallel to that of many high school curriculums. The program is a viable means of enhancing one's learning environment on a semi-independent basis. Students meet with a contact person on an as needed basis, working at their own pace, on their own time in between meetings. P.A.S.S. courses can also be administered in a regular classroom setting with a teacher or other contact person present for assistance and guidance.

The content of each course is broken down into five units which equal one semester of work or one-half credit. This translates into 90 hours of instruction per course or 18 hours per unit. Each unit features exercises to enhance comprehension skills, graphic examples to reinforce concepts and structure, and interactive lessons that include

discussion with a contact person, other student(s), or both. If a course is completed, credits can be granted towards high school completion.

The P.A.S.S. and Mini-P.A.S.S. program can be utilized in other manners as well. Courses that students may have taken and failed, can be re-taken using this alternative method. Courses that may have been started but remain incomplete, can be completed without redoing the material previously covered. Additionally, courses can be taken as a tutorial aid in conjunction with another course of study that the student may also be taking. Lastly, P.A.S.S. can be used for enrichment and remediation purposes or simply out of general interest.

Some components which have been identified as essential contributors to successful participation in an alternative method of education (such as P.A.S.S.) have been identified as follows: variety of options, support and guidance, active decision-making by student, conferencing with teacher or others, contractual agreements, ongoing self-assessment and goal setting, and a nonauthoritarian teaching style (Williams, et al, 1934).

A closer look at the characteristics for which P.A.S.S. is recognized indicates that it indeed exhibits many, if not all, of the aforementioned components deemed as important to the implementation of such a program:

- 1) Variety of options: As an example, while the amount may vary from state to state, currently Maine P.A.S.S. offers a total of thirty-one P.A.S.S. courses and eighteen Mini-P.A.S.S. courses. Subject areas for the P.A.S.S. courses include Math, History, Study Skills, Science, Art, English, Health Education, Work Experience, and Learning Skills. Courses may be selected for enrichment

purposes or as a step towards high school completion in which case credit would be granted upon course completion. While some courses are sequential, many can be taken in any order that the student desires. As another example, Mini-P.A.S.S. courses offered in Maine include History, Science, Language Arts, and Math. Mini-P.A.S.S. can be used for enrichment, for remediation purposes, or as a stepping stone in preparation for taking P.A.S.S. courses.

Specifically, a number of P.A.S.S. courses offer topics that could prove to be both helpful and relevant to the incarcerated population. The following are offered as examples and include the topics mentioned:

- Consumer Math: money management, housing costs, comparative shopping, credit, and budgeting.
- Study Skills: cause and effect, critical thinking skills, problem-solving, comprehension, and listening techniques.
- Environmental Science B: smoking risks, drug use and abuse, and chemical dependency.
- English IIIB: job hunting skills, resume writing, letter writing, communication techniques, and critical thinking.
- Health Education: emotional and physical wellness, coping with stress, and communicable diseases.
- Learning Skills: registering with an employment agency, understanding the newspaper, and researching skills.
- Work Experience: Decision-making, goal setting, applying for a job, interview skills, and how to keep a job.

(Procedures Manual for the Portable Assisted Study Sequence, 1995)

2) Support and Guidance: P.A.S.S. is facilitated via a contact person responsible for assisting the student by serving as a resource when needed, providing the student with necessary materials, explaining the grading procedure, and administering any tests when applicable. The contact person, perhaps an adult educator in this case, can also advise the student on course choice, sequence of courses, if applicable, and what courses are needed if the student is working towards high school completion. In addition, the contact person is responsible for reviewing the student's progress on a regular basis and providing assistance when needed.

3) Active Decision-Making by Students: In states such as Maine, as well as in twenty-eight others, correctional education is voluntary with incentives being offered for participation in many cases. Those states that have voluntary programs as opposed to mandatory cite various reasons for doing so, one being that the inmate must want to attend voluntarily in order for the program to be effective (di Vito, 1991). The ability to pursue one's education rather than have it mandated is certainly an important, active decision made by inmates.

As previously mentioned, students have a choice of courses to select from as well as a choice in determining whether or not they are pursuing high school completion, supplementing their interests, or simply making an attempt at reducing boredom. They may also play an active part in establishing a time limit for the unit or units that they are working on.

4) Conferencing with Contact Person or Others: P.A.S.S.'s flexible nature

allows for one student to be working on one or more courses, or for several students to be working on the same course or on several different courses simultaneously. Furthermore, while some students may opt to have frequent conferences with the designated contact person, others may exercise a greater degree of independence and choose to meet on a much more infrequent basis. Dependent on the correctional institution and its policies, students may also have the opportunity to meet with other inmates involved with P.A.S.S. for discussions, for project completion such as may arise in the Sciences, and for mentoring purposes. Some correctional institutions may include a library available to students for research or studying. Also dependent on institutional policy is the possibility of allowing inmates to return to their cells with their coursework.

5) Contractual Agreements: While contractual agreements are included as an important component in successful alternative educational programs, the P.A.S.S. program does not mandate that they occur. Rather, a contract is optional and may result if the student so chooses to enact one. Again, this component plays an important role in the decision-making process as the student determines the time frame involved. Whether or not a contractual agreement is drawn up may depend upon the length of the sentence being served and the incentive(s) for participation. Some of the most commonly cited reasons for participating in a voluntary educational program while incarcerated include self-improvement, to get a job upon release, to impress the parole board, and to complete a high school education through attaining a GED or via other means (Ryan et al, 1994).

In some cases, a contractual agreement may be a challenge set up by the inmate looking for a first chance at success. The nature of the courses being divided into five units may be more palatable and much less overwhelming than being faced with a curriculum in its entirety. For those unaccustomed to commitment or achievement in a learning environment, successful completion of a single unit may be a stepping stone to the pursuance of other units and a milestone in the awareness that education is more of an attainable, rather than an insurmountable goal, if taken step by step.

6) Ongoing Self-Assessment and Goal Setting: The ultimate responsibility for success in any educational program lies with the student. Perhaps, this is even more evident in a self-regulated, self-paced course of study such as P.A.S.S. In order for the program to be successful, students must develop a feel for their capabilities, establish a method of attaining the goals they have set for themselves, and have access to the resources (be they manpower or materials) that can assist them to reach those goals. The semi-independent nature of the courses allow students the room to explore their motives and interest level while working at their own pace. Such a process promotes autonomy and confidence - two key characteristics that adult learners must aspire to.

While some students' goals, for example, may be scoring a high grade on a unit test, others may interpret a goal as simply finishing something that they have begun, be it a unit, a course, or a book that they may have read as part of a course. Others may set their sights on loftier goals such as high school completion. Goals are set by the individual and supported by contact

person(s) who can assist the inmate in attaining those goals. Again, active decision-making by the student is witnessed. Additionally, in those states such as Maine where correctional education is not mandated, inmates must initially assess the reason that they wish to participate, if choosing to do so.

The assumption made in the education of adults is that adults are self-directed learners. However, inmates are often characterized by the belief that their own actions and their consequences rest outside of their immediate control, that is, they possess an external locus of control. A gradual shift to a more democratic style in education where students are allowed more input and decision-making encourages the shift to internal locus of control whereby student inmates may explore the cause and effect of their own behavior upon their successful or failed educational endeavors. (Love, 1991). The realization that they control their own fate by their ability and effort may assist these learners in becoming more self-directed.

7) Nonauthoritarian teaching style: It is evident by the above that P.A.S.S. is not conducive to a heavy-handed teaching approach. The contact person is much more of a facilitator, an advisor, and a resource person rather than an authority figure using a pedantic approach. While unit tests are incorporated into the courses, tests can be re-administered and there is no penalty for taking a prolonged amount of time to complete a course. The contact person is not there to reprimand, lecture, or dictate but rather to encourage, assist, and guide.

Added to the above seven characteristics is that of the program's portability. P.A.S.S.

is portable in many senses of the word. As previously mentioned, a course is divided into five separate units. Students need only have in their possession the section that they are currently working on - not the curriculum in its entirety which would most certainly be viewed as unapproachable, not to mention cumbersome, for many. In this way, if allowable, inmates may carry their relevant materials back to their cells or to the library or other study areas after meeting with their contact person.

Its portability also lends itself to the fact that if an inmate begins the P.A.S.S. program while incarcerated and is released before completion of the program, or course he or she is working on, or even of a particular unit, the inmate may still achieve the intended goal through the Adult Education program closest to his or her place of residence upon release. In conjunction with the correctional institution from which the inmate is released, the Adult Education Director or other designated personnel can obtain records of what has been completed thus far. In this way, students can build upon their previous efforts and successes rather than starting from anew. Credits that may have accrued during the period of incarceration are not lost, but rather transferable towards high school completion. Lastly, inmates beginning P.A.S.S. while incarcerated who may choose to leave the state upon release, can again continue the program if moving to one of the several states offering this alternative method of education.

As with the migrant population, those in correctional institutions often cannot envision alternatives beyond their current lifestyle. Both often feel caught in a cycle of helplessness and dependence. In the case of the itinerant workers, following the stream of migrant labor is often the only life they have ever experienced. The same may hold true for members of the correctional population who may resign themselves

to a cycle of committing crimes with no visible means of escape. The most common threads among inmates are poverty and unemployment followed closely by illiteracy and high school dropout status (Glover, et al, 1989). These factors are also often prevalent in the life of many migrant workers as they search for the next harvest, work for meager wages, and continue to experience a high dropout rate estimated at 50% (Diaz, et al, 1990).

The Portable Assisted Study Sequence is one means towards attainment of high school completion. It is hopeful that an increasing number of correctional institutions nationwide will recognize the viability of this flexible means of alternative education. Its attributes ranging from active decision-making by the student, to nonauthoritarian teaching style of the contact person, all encompass what may be a first step to educational success if made available to the correctional population.

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